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FILE ONLY

CIA Hired Lebanese Agents In Aborted '84 Hostage Mission

By **Knut Royce**

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Washington — The Central Intelligence Agency set in motion but later aborted a paramilitary operation using Lebanese agents to attempt a rescue of its Beirut station chief soon after he was kidnaped by Shiite fundamentalist terrorists in 1984, a senior military official said.

The seizure of the CIA officer, William Buckley, by Iranian-backed Hezbollah terrorists on March 16, 1984, helped launch the Reagan administration's ill-fated Iran-contra affair. Buckley was tortured and died in captivity the following spring.

The CIA "had zeroed in on the location, and there were some preliminary steps made to set assets [Lebanese agents] in place to launch the operation," the military official, who is a terrorism expert, said. He described them as "hired assassins."

"But it was never launched," he said. "I think we may have lost assets in the preliminary steps." He did not disclose what those steps were.

Al-Aalam, an Arabic-language magazine published in Iran, reported last month that the United States had "undertaken a disastrous military operation . . . for the purpose of rescuing Buckley."

A U.S. official familiar with the magazine as having been a "credible" publication when the shah was in power said it is now a "mouthpiece" for Iran's fundamentalist regime.

The magazine said its sources refused to provide details of the alleged military operation, which it said "ended in utter failure" and led to the "execution" of Buckley by his captors. U.S. officials believe Buckley died in Lebanon following long and painful torture.

One intelligence source said he believes Buckley died in April, 1985, when a reference to an "orange crate" (a code word for hostage) having been "broken" was intercepted in Lebanon. There are other accounts that he died in June, 1985.

After Buckley's death, the Tower commission reports, U.S. officials tried to obtain his body and a copy from Iranian authorities of a lengthy "confession" he had made to the Hezbollah.

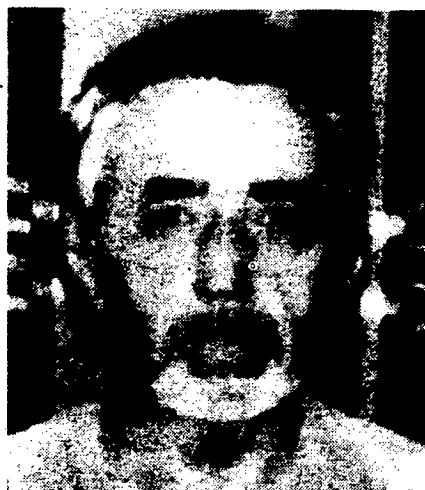
The U.S. military official and a congressional intelligence specialist said

they believed it was the failed attempt to rescue Buckley that Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North was describing in a memorandum contained in the Tower commission report as a "botched" CIA effort to rescue another hostage, Peter Kilburn.

North complained to the then-national security adviser, Vice Adm. John Poindexter, on June 3 that the CIA "took so long and then botched the Kilburn effort."

Kilburn, who reportedly was held by another terrorist group, was killed by his captors after the U.S. raid on Libya in April.

The intelligence aide, while refusing to discuss the reported rescue attempt on Buckley, said he did not believe such an effort was made for Kilburn.



Hostage William Buckley

A U.S. official who was in Lebanon at the time Kilburn was held captive said the United States "didn't know enough about Kilburn or where he was" to attempt a rescue.

CIA spokeswoman Kathy Pherson refused yesterday to discuss North's reference to the "Kilburn effort" and whether North may have confused Buckley with Kilburn.

The Washington Post reported in November that the CIA spent a "small fortune" on informants, communication intercepts and other technical intelligence in an attempt to learn where Buckley and the other hostages were being held.

It said the agency even sent into

Beirut an FBI team that specializes in locating kidnap victims. The team failed to find Buckley after a month's investigation.

The Pentagon, according to North's June 3 memorandum, "steadfastly refused" to initiate a military rescue operation "unless we can develop some hard intelligence of their whereabouts."

Nevertheless, it appears that the Pentagon had contingency plans for a rescue operation at least since late 1985. A North memorandum dated Monday, Dec. 9, 1985, discussed four options for extricating the hostages.

One was "raid and attempt rescue" that "the military should be directed to execute by no later than Saturday." The apparent target was Hezbollah.

In addition, according to the Tower report, on June 6 President Ronald Reagan reportedly "approved military planning to rescue the hostages."

The Pentagon also appears to have had contingency plans for punitive missions.

In October, when U.S. officials believed the three American hostages then being held were to be released imminently, a commando team was dispatched to Cyprus, according to a knowledgeable U.S. official. Had they all been released, he said, the administration would have had the option to order a punitive strike against terrorist targets.

Only David Jacobsen was subsequently freed, and the military option was scrubbed, he said.